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Producing ideal Bangladeshi migrants for precarious construction work in Qatar

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Abstract: The paper analyses the mediation of Bangladeshi construction worker migration to the Gulf and how multiple and unpredictable risks and opportunities are co-created by brokers, employers and the state. It examines how migrants navigate these to achieve imagined futures and their own role in co-creating precarity. The authors employ a relational lens to examine the why aspiring migrants choose informal brokers over formal migration managers. The everyday practices of brokers in producing ideal Bangladeshi workers for the Qatari labour market and how this precarises migrant labour are unpacked. Migrant and broker interviews provide insights into the degrees of precarity experienced at different stages of the migration process. Entangled with these processes of precarisation are the strategies employed by migrant workers to resist precarity and transform their social and economic positions in the long term. The rich accounts presented in the paper provide evidence on the dialectical relationship between migrants and migration intermediaries which contrasts with popular discourses about brokers as exploiters and migrants as victims without agency.

Key words: precarity, subjectivation, Bangladesh, migrant construction work, agency

Introduction

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states have emerged as important destinations for Bangladeshi workers since the early 1970s (Rahman 2012). Many are employed in construction where they occupy specific niches in unskilled and semi-skilled work together with workers from neighbouring countries in South Asia including Nepal and India. Low-paid construction work is notorious worldwide for precarious work conditions and is dominated by migrants from less affluent and marginalised populations. This paper delves into the specificities of precarity, subjectivation and agency in the migration trajectory of Bangladeshi construction workers in Qatar. It examines the role of brokers in producing and mitigating insecurities and vulnerabilities at different stages of the migration process and how their practices intersect with national and international migration management systems. It sheds light on multiple layers of precarity that Bangladeshi workers must navigate in their efforts to build a better life for themselves and their families and where and how brokers work with them to support their aspirations where they frustrate them. Our focus is mainly on informal brokers at origin who have considerable leverage on the paths and trajectories that migrants

take. An examination of their workings is essential to understand the multiple risks and opportunities that migrants experience during their recruitment and placement at overseas.

The central research questions were to understand how brokers and the migration industry channel Bangladeshi workers into precarious jobs in the Qatari construction industry, how they cope with the subject positions that they find themselves in and how they counter power structures of exploitation to achieve their long term goals. Research on transnational systems of labour mobility identify the processes that lead to a concentration of migrant workers from poorer regions and relatively disadvantaged communities in precarious jobs, especially in rich countries (Sassen, 2001; Anderson 2010). The role of brokers in positioning workers in these niches has also been researched in the Global North (Pratt 1999) as well as the Gulf (Gamburd 2000; Fernandez 2010). However comparable literature on Bangladeshi migration to the Gulf is relatively thin. The few studies that exist examine the economics of brokerage (Rahman, 2012, Fee and Rahman 2006) without delving deep into the social relations that underpin precarity.

The research on which this paper is based scrutinizes mediation processes that occur in the migration journey between places of origin and examines the positionality of migrant labour in relation to capital, brokers and the state. The paper sheds light on the points in the migration process where precarization and subjectivation occurs, the role that brokers and migrants play in mutually constituting them and how migrants strategise to move out of situations of precarity. This paper takes a subject-centred and embodied agency approach, examining the brokerage process through migrants' own perspective which only a handful of other studies have done such as Dannecker's research on Bangladeshi migrants in Malaysia (2009) and Afsar's (2009) research on migration to the Gulf and most recently Baey and Yeoh (2018) on Bangladeshi construction workers in Singapore.

While the paper concludes that migration brokerage inherently precarizes rural Bangladeshis in a variety of ways, it also highlights the need to recognise this as a strategy employed by them to access work and migration opportunities that they believe hold the promise for long terms improvements in their and their families' socio-economic position. In view of the findings that were emerging from this work it was felt that the literature in four areas of research would be relevant to guide the analysis; first, the literature on moralities and trust to analyse social relations between migrants and brokers, second the role of brokers and the migration industry in subjectivation and constructing worker identities for low-paid migrant work, third precarity and hyperprecarity and the role of brokers in creating precarity and fourth, conceptualisations of agency in precarious work and life conditions. Due to the vast body of work under all of these themes only key sources are cited.

In the Bangladeshi moral discourse, brokers carry the pejorative descriptor of *Adam Bepari* or "traders in human bodies" typifying the view which gives all the power to the broker and deprives the migrant of any control over the process. Similar discourses which demonise recruiters and victimise migrants prevail in other countries (Lindquist 2010, McKeown 2012, Spener 2009, Liemph and Sersli 2013). As in other contexts, the state in Bangladesh tries to delegitimise private brokers and establish a monopoly over the movement of people (Alpes 2013; Xiang 2013). Ethnographies of the relationship between brokers and migrants have delved deeper into moralities, social bonds of trust and how these play out in migration brokerage. Osella's (2014) research in India, a society with similar cultural

norms, highlights the difficulty of separating trust from profit making and takes a deeper look at why migrants trust brokers despite their popular characterisation as dishonest and how they evaluate the success of the project in circumstances that are exploitative. Research in other contexts has also shown that trust is important and maintaining it is essential to securing the position of a broker in the community (Spaan 2009; Alpes 2013). Lindquist (2012: 75) also emphasises the importance of trust for brokers in reassuring migrants that they have the ability to community with a range of actors in intermediary spaces and bridge cultural divides between them to enable migration (Lindquist 2012: 75).

At the same time brokers play a key role in constructing and representing workers to prospective employers and creating expectations about their attributes and behaviour. Pratt's research shows the role of recruiters in producing and reinforcing racialized and gendered categories of workers which feed into the differences at the work place (Pratt 1997). There is now a rich literature on the way in which brokers co-construct rankings based on stereotypes that are demarcated by personal attributes, thereby producing identities that employers want (Tyner 1999, Awumbila et al, this volume, Picherit this volume). In doing so some groups are constructed as superior and others relegated to the bottom of the employment hierarchy, a pattern that we observe in the Qatari construction industry as well. The segmentation of work undertaken by Bangladeshi migrants based on nationality and racial stereotyping has also been documented in Malaysia (Dannecker 2005) as well as Singapore (Baey and Yeoh 2018; Ye 2013).

The experiences of migrants at the bottom of the employment chain even in large construction companies can thus be one of extreme precarity as research in other contexts has shown (Pattenden 2016; Baey and Yeoh 2018). Migrants are concentrated in dangerous and degrading jobs where the terms of employment are insecure and poorly paid (even though wages compare well with those at origin). Migrant workers must navigate the constraints on their agency given the subject positions that have been pushed upon them by employers and migration mediators. For those traversing international boundaries an additional layer of precarity is introduced by the constraints to life and citizenship created by enforced temporariness and lack of citizenship rights. The constant threat of eviction for irregular migrants as many Bangladeshi workers are renders their existence in a permanent state of, what Lewis et al (2015) call hyperprecarity.

There is now a vast literature on the migration industry and the analysis of its role in precarizing migrants through exploitation has shifted significantly from early conceptualizations of brokers as ruthless exploiters perpetuating circuits of low-paid migrants for profit (see for example Salt and Stein), to understanding the range of organizations involved in facilitating mobility (Hernandez Leon;) and more recently to recognize the dialectical relationship between brokers and migrants (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sorensen 2013; Sporton 2013). We focus on agency within this relationship and in doing so we are guided by the work of labour geographers including Castree (2008), Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2011) and Carswell and De Neve (2013) who highlight the importance of a holistic understanding of worker positionality and agency beyond the workplace. They call for more engagement with gender and family identities, ethnicity and racial power dynamics in origin and destination.

The scholarship on the temporality of agency also offers useful concepts that we apply in this paper to examine whether and what kinds of agency can be exercised in a context of hyperprecarity. We engage with these discussions by looking at the timing of particular actions and the expected gains (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011, p10.). In particular concepts of the geography of waiting offer a useful way of examining the strategies that migrants employ to overcome precarity. There are two strands of research on waiting: one where enforced waiting is examined as a form of powerful groups exercising control over certain populations (Olson 2015); another conceptualizes waiting undertaken by migrants as a form of coping and resistance. Axelsson, Malmberg and Zhang examine different work-time configurations of living and work of Chinese restaurants workers in Sweden to understand how precarity is maintained and challenged. Their analysis of the acceptance of precarious work-time arrangements by Chinese migrants to achieve certain life course trajectories resonates with our findings in Bangladesh.

Methodological approach

The paper draws on mixed methods research conducted between 2013 and 2015 including a household survey¹ and indepth interviews. Eleven international migrants were selected from the survey sample based on their location, migration history and occupation. Those who had been migrants for more than a couple of years were interviewed as this was felt to be necessary to gain an understanding of their experiences over time and the negotiations and strategies that they employed while navigating precarity at destination. Half the interviews were conducted with migrants who were back in Bangladesh on leave before returning to Qatar again and the remainder with those who had completed a period of migration there and had returned for good. The interviews were conducted through more than one session lasting an hour each time in order to probe relational aspects in sufficient detail. International migration from Chapai is lower than other better established outmigration areas like Sylhet . This makes it very suitable for studying the dynamics of migration brokerage as social networks are relatively under-developed and aspiring migrants depend on informal brokers or dalals to guide them through official emigration procedures. The paper also draws on interviews with border control officials and recruitment agencies. Finally, three focus group discussions were held in Chapai with village level brokers, sub-district officials and the local construction workers' trade union *Nirman Sromik Union*.

The research showed that despite the formalisation of recruitment and placement processes for Bangladeshis seeking work in Qatar, a number of irregularities are present even in formalised procedures. These are created and sustained by a network of informal village level dalals, other informal intermediaries in district towns whom we shall also refer to as dalas, formal recruitment agencies (RAs) in Dhaka and Qatar as well as employing companies in Qatar. Employment companies in Qatar work closely with government and government approved licence holders to secure official clearances but also in collusion over creating precarity as we discuss below. This paper presents the results of interviews with four male construction workers as illustrative of different paths to precarity as well as the actions they took to mitigate precarity. The research does not claim to be

¹ The survey covered 1200 households and 6000 individuals with 1500 current migrants spread over 51 villages in six Upazilas (districts).

representative but provides insights into the kinds of relations and transactions that occur between migrants and those who mediate migration and how this impacts on their precariousness and outcomes over the longer term.

Background

Chapainawabganj lies near the border with India and is a highly fertile mango producing area. Due to a number of rivers passing through, fishing is also a major economic activity. Seasonal migration within the country to manage shortfalls in income is widespread and is undertaken mainly by poorer people (Siddiqui 2012). There is a growing trend towards migration to the Gulf which is typically undertaken by better off households who may have resources from agriculture or savings from internal migration (Gardner 2009). In Chapainawabganj this trend is relatively recent so there are few established networks and all but one migrant in our sample had to use the services of brokers to migrate. International migrants for construction work were predominantly male and in the 22-45 years age group due to social norms and expectations of men in this age as providers for the extended family. There were no female migrants for construction work due to cultural norms and ideas of masculinity and femininity where the idea of female migration away from family and into foreign territory that is regarded as risky and dangerous.²

The immigration regime in Qatar: formalising precarity

The construction industry in Qatar and temporary migrant worker policy have been organised around neoliberal objectives of flexible labour and limits on immigration. All employment of foreigners in Qatar is regulated through the Kafala system where certain institutions or individuals known as Kafeels are issued permits for employing foreign workers on short-term contracts. Those migrating to Qatar to work in construction must obtain a company sponsored visa as well as a residence permit and ID card if they intend to stay for more than six months. Through its very structure the Kafala system creates and formalises precarity by depriving migrants of full citizenship rights. The system creates the conditions for extracting cheap labour while giving little security in return. Workers are tied to a single employer, imposing the risk of arrest and deportation if rules are broken and imposing transience and immobility while migrants are there. However an illegal system of “visa trading” is widely prevalent where Kafeels sell the permits on the black market to companies who recruit workers in their name. Visas obtained through such a route are extremely risky to the migrant as they become illegal and highly precarious migrants as soon as they enter the country (Shah 2008, Rahman 2012). Yet, as we will discuss later in the paper these “free” visas are much sought after because it gives the workers the freedom to choose where they work and how they chart out their future. Self-precarization as a strategy to fulfil long term goals is discussed under one of the cases later in the paper.

The chain of recruitment starts with the Kafeel approaching a recruitment agent to recruit workers and this must be done in accordance with quotas set by the government of Qatar. Bangladeshis are

² Until recently women were not allowed to migrate internationally from Bangladesh due to government policies rooted in such cultural beliefs (Dannecker 2009). Now, the international migration of women is significant but into other occupations such as domestic work that are stereotypically assigned to women although not from this area where migration is relatively recent and still male dominated. However it should be noted that the migration of women for construction work within the country for “women’s work” such as carrying bricks and sifting sand is widespread (Ahsan 1997; Shah 2004).

typically channelled by brokers and RAs into the lowest jobs in construction as their employment is conditioned by stereotypes related to their skills where they are characterised as being capable only of unskilled work and attitudes – being docile or as Ye (2013) says, “meek” and accepting of harsh working conditions. Other groups and nationalities are constructed as more professional, trustworthy and are thereby given higher jobs. It is likely that these stereotypes derive from historical precursors to such stereotyping in Qatari society related to darker skin or certain sub-cultures. Employment quotas are ostensibly set by skill level, in practice they appear to be based on nationality which is associated with particular attributes but this is never stated formally (Jureidini 2014). RA mediation between employers in Qatar and aspiring migrants in Bangladesh respond to expectations related to the kinds of workers required but also reinforce and institutionalise the differences on which they are based. Bangladeshi migrant workers are ideal to be positioned in niches where they can be exploited and cheap labour extracted. Workers must navigate the constraints on their agency that this creates as they are produced as ideal subjects for the Qatari labour market.

The emigration regime in Bangladesh: deligitimising informal brokers

In Bangladesh discourses to deligitimise brokers have led to state efforts to eliminate or heavily regulate brokers by creating a range of institutions to oversee and monitor migration processes and prevent aspiring migrants using intermediaries that have not been approved by government. The Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) was created under the Ministry of Expatriates’ Welfare and Overseas Employment responsible for regulating formally registered recruitment agencies, issuing emigration clearances, checking the authenticity of visas and employment contracts and safeguarding the welfare of Bangladeshi migrants overseas (Rahman 2012). Bangladesh has also set up Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Services Limited (BOESL) a state-owned manpower exporting company and also a database where aspiring migrants’ details of skills and experience are entered so that they can be matched to employers, thereby eliminating the middleman. However one recruitment agency described it as “junk” and completely unusable because it did not include the kind of workers that employers were looking for, again illustrating the importance of broker selected and “produced” workers.

The recruitment process

Qatari RAs tasked with finding workers approach RAs in Bangladesh who then outsource recruitment to a network of informal dalals in Dhaka, regional towns and at the village level. Dalals with credibility in rural areas are essential for sourcing the pliant and obedient workforce that is being sought. Village level dalals are often return migrants who command respect locally for their experience and achievement but also have the resources to compensate migrants for losses. As Lindquist states, a broker “embodies the social position and many of the ethical qualities that are considered critical in the recruitment process” (Lindquist 2010: 86). To become a *dalal* requires social skills that allow them to navigate official processes and territories which would be frightening for the

average rural resident arriving in a big city such as Dhaka. One broker stressed these qualities “*Those who want to be a “supplier”³, have to earn the good will from every side of society. They need social recognition, power and money. Most of us own lands and mango gardens. In particular they need the power to find immediate solutions when a worker gets into trouble.*” They know they will be held responsible if the project goes wrong even if it is caused by irregularities further up the recruitment chain. “In many instances we are cheated by agencies in Dhaka. They take advances (money) from us but fail to deliver the visas as promised; at other times they do not give any firm date about when the visa will come. We have to face the anger of aspiring migrants and their families”, Urban dalals in district towns and Dhaka come from a variety of backgrounds; they can be travel agents, drivers or urban professionals. What they have in common is entrepreneurial skills and the capacity to develop personal relationships with a variety of institutions that are important for obtaining documentation and clearances from government bodies. We train the spotlight on the relationship between the migrant and brokers through the experience of Mohammad, a 45 year old migrant who had been a migrant in Qatar for five years.

Mohammad, decided to migrate when years of farming and seasonal migration to Dhaka failed to yield the improvements in living standards that he had hoped for. He approached Rahman, a well-known *dalal* in the area whom he refers to as “Uncle”, a typical way of referring to elders in the community in South Asia. Uncle had promised to “manage everything” to send him abroad. Uncle was the main source of information and guidance for the entire process and Mohammad was discouraged from approaching anyone else for these. Establishing monopoly control over his migration in this way enabled Rahman to chart the course of Mohammad’s migration without challenge: he accompanied Mohamad to Dhaka to his preferred recruitment agency (RA) known as “Taj Office”, accompanied him to the skills and health certification centres, no doubt also in his regular network and helped him prepare for the interview for the visa and work permit. Mohammad placed absolute trust in Uncle but appreciated being shepherded through a process that would have been overwhelming and frightening for him on his own. He accepted whatever work and wage conditions, the broker could offer. *I was very ignorant about foreign countries. I did not even know which company is good or bad. That’s why I asked uncle. He told me that I am his loved one and whatever is good for me he will definitely do that only.* Another reason for not questioning the judgement of the broker could be Bangladeshi generational norms of showing respect to elders, especially powerful male patrons in the community (Rashid and Sikder 2016: 8).

Another migrant, 28 year old Aktar, a farmer’s son who migrated to Qatar in 2007 also used the services of a broker with a good reputation in the community. Aktar was urged by his father to migrate after he struggled at school. The capital outlay for his migration was mobilized by Akbar’s father and uncle who sold part of their land. The broker was well known in the community and Akbar was confident that nothing would go wrong as the verbal contract had been witnessed by the *Matbar*. He expressed a strong preference for this arrangement rather than going directly to an agency in Dhaka. *I am more at ease dealing with the dalal who lives in the next village and whom I can reach*

³ This term is preferred by the brokers instead of the pejorative term *dalal* which carries connotations of exploitation.

⁴ The moral contract with a *dalal* in the village is often witnessed by village elders locally known as *Matbars* or *Shashlikars*.

anytime than some recruiting agency in Dhaka. In case the deal goes bad the chances of recovery of money are much higher from the dalal through social pressure than from a powerful agency.

Although brokers invoke co-ethnic and kinship bonds to establish trust, both parties realize that the transaction is for profit as well, chiming with the findings of Osella's research with Gulf migration brokers in Kerala.

The decision of Bangladeshi men to migrate to Qatar through brokers despite the costs and hazards being well-known in the community must be viewed against the choices that these men had before taking the decision to migrate. Younger men reported being encouraged by their parents to migrate after they had not shown aptitude for business or education and others were migrating to mobilise funds for repaying debts or to fund large family projects. In such a context the broker becomes a key means of expanding agency by providing more choices to aspiring migrants helping them to transgress the spatial and social boundaries that prevent them from improving their socio-economic status. The broker positions himself (we did not come across any female brokers) as an indispensable part of their migration and self-development strategies.

Predeparture – expanded agency but positioned to enter precarity

Entering into a contract with the broker is the start of the precarisation process and the first plunge into precarity is due to the heavy cost. Our interviews indicate that Bangladeshi men pay more than other nationalities to migrate to Qatar, corroborating other research in the Gulf (Gardner et al 2009; Jureidini 2014). All of the migrants (and their families) we interviewed went into debt to migrate to pay brokers' fees which were up to 2,00,000 BDT (\$2500) at the time of the study. This was almost twice as much as an earlier study by DLA Piper had found; by their estimates the average was \$1250 (DLA Piper 2014). This possibly reflected shrinking opportunities and tightening border controls in Qatar as well as fewer brokers in relation to the numbers wanting to migrate. Workers must pay recruitment fees upfront and not have them deducted from wages as the Qatari Labour Law prohibits this (Jureidini 2014: 76). While ostensibly designed to protect migrants against exploitation, this measure shifted the precarity on to the family by pushing them into debt and creating an obligation for the migrant to persevere in precarious conditions until the debt was repaid. Despite the heavy costs, Bangladeshis are adversely incorporated into the racially segmented labour market at the lowest rungs as unskilled or semi-skilled. The case studies show that brokers will accept only those men who are from relatively deprived backgrounds and prepared to enter exploitative work arrangements but at the same time those who can draw on family resources to pay for their fees.

Most brokers promise the aspiring migrant that they will be notified when a *bhalo* or good visa arrives, which they evaluate on the basis of obtaining an assured passage and placement for the migrant. This minimises the risk for the broker and also fulfils the aspirations of the men to travel abroad. However there is little predictability or guarantee about the process after this initial recruitment. Lived experiences of the migrants indicate that multiple and unpredictable risks and vulnerabilities are possible along the way but the shared understanding between the migrant and the dalal is that the migrant will be delivered to the destination and be given a job.

Migrants must undergo a series of training and certification procedures before they can travel to Qatar and these provide opportunities for irregularities, and thus precarities, to be created. An important step in the work permit (also known as manpower card) process is the occupational category to which a worker is assigned. Since there are limited places for Bangladeshis to migrate as unskilled workers, brokers and agencies as well as the companies that employ them collude to classify them as carpenters or occupations that are in demand. Whereas in other locations, brokers are actively involved in producing workers with certain attributes for employers, the identity ascription in this case is co-constituted by networks of intermediaries as well as employers and driven by state regulations and quotas based on national stereotypes. One way in which this is done is by falsifying the skill level of the migrant. The case below shows that papers falsely stating occupations can place migrants in a highly precarious situation because they are exposed to the risk of being deported and losing their money.

False Identities

Twenty six year old Aziz has been a migrant in Qatar for five years when we interviewed him. After being told by his father that he was not suited to taking on the family business, he migrated with the help of his maternal uncle who had settled in Qatar where he ran a small business (not clear what). The uncle procured an illegal work visa through his connections in Qatar and sent it to him directly. He told Aziz to approach a dalal to connect him to a “Sharika” company. According to Aziz these are small companies set up by Bangladeshis who obtain Kafala sponsored visas (illegally) in Qatar and send them to prospective migrants in Bangladesh directly. We were not able to verify this statement.

Aziz was promised 950 Riyals a month by the Sharika representative in Dhaka but was not asked to sign a contract. He realized that something was seriously wrong when he obtained his manpower card after arrival in Qatar which described him as a carpenter. *My interview was taken when I went there. The job I was assigned to was the job of carpenter which I found out through my card on which it was written. As I didn't know much about the job of a carpenter they scolded me for coming there without enough knowledge of the job assigned. They also threatened me that I will be sent back to my country.*

Unbeknownst to Aziz, he had been assigned the occupational identity of a carpenter to get him across on the quota issued by the Qatari authorities. But this had placed him in a hyper-precarious position as he was the victim of both deprivation of rights at work and an insecure legal status as he was threatened with deportation. According to our discussions with government officials, companies routinely appear to use threats of deportation to instil a sense of fear and control over migrants once they are in the country. It is very likely that the company knew exactly what had transpired as they were employing Aziz through brokers in Qatar who link up with brokers on the other side to forge work permits and prepare false papers and “package” workers according to quotas. An official from the Planning Commission confirmed to us that this is common practice and recalled the case of a group of 21 workers who were all unskilled but were recruited as carpenters.

Aziz realized that such experiences were common after talking to his Bangladeshi co-workers. They offered to train him on the job during which time he earned a lower amount (he didn't say how much and for how long) and eventually started earning 950 QAR. He was to experience further precarities in Qatar as we discuss in section **XX**. The only course of action open to Aziz in such a situation was to

wait. He was not in a position to leave because of the amount of money his family had borrowed and the family expectations that had been placed on him. At the same time he firmly believed that persevering would eventually lead to gains and the possibility to move on to something better.

Retaining Contracts

Qatari construction companies use a variety of strategies to spatially fix and control labour. A common strategy is to keep workers' contracts after they have signed them. This severely limits their bargaining position as well as their freedom. When Mohammad was "handed over" to city-based brokers by Uncle he was told he would be paid QAR 750 as a basic salary but he was not given a copy and this deprived him of the opportunity to understand the terms and conditions in which he was to be employed. As the contract was in English his ability to understand it was very limited and neither the agency nor the dalal helped with the translation. It was only after arriving in Qatar that Mohammad realized that the company was using an illegally procured visa and not giving workers a copy of their contracts may have been a way of hiding these underhand dealings. Mohammad never did get possession of his contract which was kept by the company. This was no doubt a strategy to prevent workers establishing their (il)legal status in the country which would have repercussions for the company. Mohammad's existence in Qatar was thus totally circumscribed by the company and the Kafeel who had illegally colluded with them. He was confined in a hyper-precarious state as he would need the Kafeel's to leave legally and this could be withheld. The ability of brokers, recruiting agencies and employers to function in illegal ways such as these with impunity is enabled by a dysfunctional system of factory inspection and unaccountable embassy officials.

Contract Substitution

Another relatively common irregularity in Bangladesh-Qatar migration is contract substitution. Ahmed is a 41-year old man with a rice trading background and experience of seasonal migration for construction work to Dhaka. He decided to take the risk of migrating to Qatar to repay debts of 600,000 BDT which he incurred when the price of paddy suddenly dropped. Ahmed approached a known broker in Dhaka who promised to get him to Qatar for 200,000 BDT. He was asked to sign a contract and promised a wage of 900 QAR but was not given a copy of the contract. To his dismay, when he reached Qatar, he was told he was going to be paid 700 QAR instead of 900. The company bosses denied all responsibility and knowledge and claimed not to understand him. *They used to speak in Arabic, English or Hindi. But I didn't know any language except Bengali. They didn't understand my words.* It is very likely that the company knew exactly what had happened to Ahmed as conversations with co-workers indicates that this may have been a recurring experience for Bangladeshis in the company "*Bangladeshi bhayera bollo dhoirjo shoirjo koriya thako, company [pore] salary barabe*" (Brothers from Bangladesh told me have patience and the company will increase the salary).

What Ahmed is describing is the notorious process of "contract substitution" where the conditions and salary approved by the employee prior to departure are replaced after arrival by a contract with reduced benefits. This system remains widespread in Qatar among construction workers (Burrow 2016, p 199) and the most common forms of deception involve salary levels, working hours, and type of employment (Gardner et al in 2013 Jureidini 2014: 87). As in the case of Aktar, being on tied work permit, Ahmed was trapped in a situation of hyper-precarity. The collusion between the employers,

Qatari brokers and corrupt border officials ensured that he could not legally leave the country or switch to another employer. There was little that Ahmed could do as he could not trace the broker and there were not sources of support in Qatar. Being in debt, he could not run the risk of return home before earning enough to repay the amounts owed. His salary was increased only after four years of work to QAR 1000.

Confiscation of passport and delayed wages

While Aktar did get to keep his contract, his passport and visa were taken away from him as soon as he arrived at the Qatar company although this is illegal under Qatari law. Other studies have noted the confiscation of passports after arriving in Gulf countries (Rahman 2012; Gardner et al 2013).

Furthermore wage payments were delayed by a week or more, a classic strategy used to spatially fix labour and assert power over workers⁵. Aktar's precariousness was exacerbated by the fact that he could not rely on the support of the consular services for Bangladeshi workers. *Whenever we go to the embassy the people there talk with us rudely. ... If I tell them about the problems of my company then they tell me to be careful about it.* He felt that the embassies of Nepal and India were much more helpful to their countrymen. Both rural and urban dalals are aware of these irregularities but they try to shift the blame to RAs higher up in the process to avoid reprimands from the migrant and their family. As Wise notes "precarious forms of employment based on pyramid subcontracting arrangements allow a disruption of the moral relation (however tenuous) that is present in traditional face-to-face employment arrangements" (p 1). Subcontracting is typically used by employers wishing to hire cheap labour without adhering to principles of decent work and pay as it relieves them of responsibility for the welfare of workers. It allows them to bypass moral and social relations that are embedded in traditional employment arrangements. It was through such pyramidal arrangements that Bangladeshi migrants heading to Qatar are set on an unpredictable path to precarity at destination.

Agency in a context of hyperprecarity

Migrant accounts indicate that there are three ways in which they have sought to resist and overcome the challenges they faced after being placed in highly precarious conditions in Qatar. These are waiting, collective action and self-precarisation

At the time of the interview, Mohammad was earning QAR 14-1500 which was double his initial salary. While the company had curtailed any chances of him leaving or establishing his legal status in Qatar by retaining his contract, Mohammad took his fellow workers' advice to develop contacts that could get him better work. He befriended other Bangladeshis who had worked their way up into skilled jobs and after three years of trying to prove his ability to learn and work on skilled tasks was able to find work as a plumber through a personal recommendation from one of his Bangladeshi co-workers. Mohammad's waiting here must be analysed as a way of coping with precarity but also a strategy to move beyond it over time. Indeed, despite the continuing precarity of his work and

⁵ The non payment of subcontractors by the company could be a factor as well. Subcontractors are the main employers of foreign labour and they cannot pay their workers until they themselves are paid. The normal practice in Qatar is for companies to pay their subcontractors after they have received payment from the client or 'pay when paid' (Well and Fernz 2014).

existence in Qatar, Mohammad regarded his migration as a success. After eight years, he was receiving a basic salary of QAR 1400 with a possibility of earning up to QAR 2000 a month with overtime payments. He feels that his family is much better off now that he remits between Taka 25000-50000 a month. He has repaid his relatives, spent 1200,000 BDT on building a four-bedroom house and bought irrigated paddy land for 1000000 BDT which his brother cultivates. He is planning to stop migrating once his son has an established job in Bangladesh. He plans to return to farming or to start a business back at home such as a dealership for farm inputs or a fisheries pond on lease.

Aziz's trajectory was somewhat different. After working in the first company where he was employed for a couple of years, Aziz found himself in a highly precarious situation when the company suddenly stopped paying the workers when it ran into difficulties. It is likely that the company itself was struggling to stay afloat in a competitive market and was trying to keep labour costs down, leaving workers without adequate protection. Some of the costs and risks are once again passed down to the worker as after receiving no pay for four months Aziz was told he had to pay 10,000 QAR to be released from his sponsored visa. This was clearly an unofficial practice but in a context of widespread indifference to the insecurity and exploitation of workers as well as collusion between officials, employers and RAs, Aziz was not in a position to negotiate. He was able to extract himself from an extremely precarious situation with the help of his uncle who had established relations with local construction companies and immigration officials. His uncle found a company through his contacts that was selling a free visa for 10,000 QAR and a new ID card for another QAR 2400. He also found him a job with another "small" construction company where he could earn and save for his free visa. But Aziz was again subject to highly exploitative conditions. Although there was a government rule to cease work from 11 AM to 2 PM, his new owner forced them to work during these curfew hours. *Our owner was very rude. Sometimes he made us work until 12:00 to 12:30. He was fined many times as well. We saw it. Still he does it by force.*

Aziz persevered through these deprivations and risks because his ultimate goal was a free visa which he perceived as the route to freedom. *The benefit is freedom. Companies (and tied visas) have rules that one must work for 8 hours with an additional 3 hours overtime. You also need to do what and whenever your company tells you to do. We (those with free visas) don't work all the time. We work only 8 hours and have work of different types. We work and take rest as well. We eat at home morning and evening. My future plan is to get a job. A permanent job. I mean a government job. I can go to a bigger post from that position.* A free visa is an illegally traded Kafeel sponsored visa that does not tie the migrant to a particular employer and this is thought by Chapai workers to give them more freedom of choice. As noted by O'Connell Davidson (2013) running away from legal sponsors to work illegally in the informal economy is a strategy employed by migrants to secure greater personal freedom, pay off debts and remit money to dependants, albeit under constant threat of detection and deportation. Aziz's decision to self-precarise and wait for a free visa must be understood as a strategy to achieve an imagined future of more freedom and prospects for self-development. When asked to assess how migration through a broker and being placed into a situation of high insecurity and uncertainty, Aziz recognises the hardship but feels his family's condition has improved as a result of migration. Having become an eligible bachelor with a foreign job, he has been able to marry an

educated woman. He has also supported the education of his siblings including the sister whose marriage he funded.

Aktar resisted his conditions of precarity through collective action. Faced with a situation of low wages and no clear prospects for increases, Aktar and his Bangladeshi co-workers devised strategies to obtain group job contracts that are better paid. We form a group of 15-20 men. We make a leader in the group and meet the engineer. The group leader asks him to give us a contract. Group contracts are sought after and only those who form successful relations with established workers foremen in the factory can succeed. The workers at this factory had also engaged in industrial action although this was not sanctioned under the terms of their employment in Qatar. These collective acts of negotiation and resistance were able to mitigate some of the precarity by raising Aktar's income and establishing networks of support. At the time of the interview he was occasionally earning higher amounts through such contract work and his basic salary had been increased to QAR 1000. This was the result of strike action by all the workers in the factory. However his overall situation remained precarious due to the bonded nature of his contract and confiscation of documents. Aktar also says "a lot has changed for the better" in his family as a result of migration.

Ahmed, who had migrated to repay heavy debts reported that his situation has started to improve because he had repaid his debts and married his daughter to an educated man for a dowry of 100,00 BDT. When asked how migration has impacted on his family he felt that his family's situation has improved *Before we weren't well off. Now we are.*

Conclusions

The research findings presented here show that in producing ideal Bangladeshi migrant construction workers for the Qatari labour market, brokers and other actors in the migration industry are also producing precarious subjects. In all the cases we studied, migrants were set on a particular path to precarity related to the type of company, job category and working conditions and these were co-created by brokers and other actors in the migration industry. The research shows how brokers and other actors in the migration industry collude to ascribe false identities, circumvent border controls and position Bangladeshi migrant workers in situations of precarity both in terms of their legal status in the destination country but also at the workplace. Migrant accounts throw light on the role that brokers play in shoring up stereotypes about the inherent qualities of Bangladeshi men and how these aspects of social differentiation reproduce exclusion and inequality in globally segmented labour markets.

Our research discussed two dialectical and relational dimensions of migrant agency. First, we argue that brokerage is essential for expanding agency as brokers are critical for identifying and accessing overseas work in contexts where local opportunities are insufficient for fulfilling material and social aspirations. Second, we evidence how Bangladeshi migrants perform ideal migrant roles together with brokers as a strategy for accessing openings under Qatari labour migrant employment system. We then trace how migrants navigate their disadvantaged positionality within the Qatari construction industry through waiting, collective protest and switching jobs.

Interviews with Bangladeshi migrants working in Qatar thus create an apparent contradiction because brokers are deemed as illicit and illegal by the state but are regarded as trustworthy and morally sound

by those who use their services. While there is no doubt that brokers play a key role in creating and reproducing precarity, they help migrants fulfill their goals of reaching the destination. As Osella (2014) notes in his research on South Indian migrants in the Gulf, the important thing is to get to the destination because once you get there social networks can make your migration a success. This was certainly the case in the migrant accounts that we heard. The findings therefore point to the need to regard the process of migration mediation as one of constant negotiation between migrants, brokers and employers with changing degrees of control over the course of the migration.

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